Guggenheim application
12/01

Guggenheim Fellowship Application 2001

Project Summary: Michael Wallin

My film, **HOUSE OF MIRRORS**, will explore aspects of my growing up that (may) have formed the person I am today. These include the facts of being a twin and realizing at age fourteen that I was gay. Equally important was the family dynamic: an unpredictable, explosive mother dominating a passive, emotionally distant father who died very suddenly when I was twenty-three. More generally, how does being a twin influence identity formation in various stages (age-wise)psychologically and emotionally? Is individual identity compromised or somehow merged?

Eight years ago I embarked on a second career that is a strong influence on this project: psychotherapy. There are some terms of importance related to both my identity and my family upbringing: "object constancy", "good enough mother" and "mirroring". Fundamentally, they refer to the kind of consistent and empathic nurturing in infancy and childhood leading to the development of a solid versus a fragile self. Did I have these? And what might be the consequence of their absence?

From age two months to seven months I was sent to live with a set of foster parents due to unexplained "twitching" of my limbs. I learned about this family secret several years after my father's death. When I was fourteen, living in France with my family, my twin brother ran through a plate glass window on the Champs Elysees in Paris in pursuit of a pinball machine. His face was sliced open. When I was eighteen, I experienced a series of brief psychological breakdowns, triggered by marijuana, alcohol, and the viewing of Jean Genet's homoerotic film **UN CHANT D'AMOUR.**

How did these traumatic events affect the person I am today? I have no answers but I would like to explore the possibilities in my film. Again, more generally, how does trauma (versus more consistent but less severe deficits in identity development) impact psychological/emotional growth. Bracketing (and as background to) these experiences was exposure to a variety of progressive cultural and political events in the turbulent sixties. How many versions can there be of a person's life? My own, my brother's, my mother's, my father's which I'll never know...it was a house of many mirrors.

My exploration will include excerpts from 8mm home and travel movies (I was the designated cameraman), plus family photos and slides resonant of the fifties and early sixties. I would like to tell my story primarily in the third person, to give it some degree of remove from standard autobiography and to universalize its implications.

There will be several "voices" in the film: 1) a poetic narration telling stories (including the above incidents) over images that may directly (such as the home movies) or more metaphorically (new footage I will shoot) convey intended meanings; 2) a psychoanalytic investigation that will walk the line between presumed truth and subtle subversion; 3) short acted vignettes of specific events in my childhood and adolescence, as stylistic counterpoint to the more documentary and poetic imagery. **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** will be a 16mm color/sound film thirty minutes in length.